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Power in organizational life

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CHAPTER 5

General Discussion

Power is a fundamental feature of social and organizational life. Hence, abundant research has examined the psychological consequences of power, showing that it changes individuals' cognition, emotion, and behavior (Fiske, 1993; Galinsky et al., 2003; Guinote, 2007). Building on these important insights, this dissertation addressed two critical issues within the power literature, which I believe warranted further attention. Specifically, in Chapter 1, I argued that the academic literature addressing power has predominantly conceptualized power as a (1) fixed and stable construct, and (2) corrupting force. This final chapter summarizes how the studies of Chapters 2, 3, and 4 addressed these two topics, and, by doing so, contribute to a more dynamic view of power and a more nuanced view of the relationship between power and unethical behavior. In addition, in this final chapter, I describe this dissertation's main limitations, and offer suggestions for how future research could build on the findings presented in this dissertation to further the academic understanding of power. Finally, I will end this chapter by describing the contributions of this dissertation for practice.

Overview of Main Findings

Chapter 2 examined the intrapersonal consequences of power (in)stability. Initial laboratory research showed that power and its (in)stability interact to influence stress, such that individuals assigned to unstable high-power positions and stable low-power positions experience more stress than their counterparts in stable high-power and unstable low-power positions (Jordan, Sivanathan, et al., 2011). Using a sample of Chinese managers, I replicated this important finding in an organizational field setting. Moreover, I extended this line of work by showing that the interactive effect of power and power (in)stability critically hinges on individuals' social dominance orientation (SDO). Specially, the findings presented in Chapter 2 showed that unstable power and stable powerlessness were only stressful for individuals higher (but not lower) in SDO.

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Chapter 3 also examined the consequences of power (in)stability – but this time, in an interpersonal rather than intrapersonal way. Across five studies, I investigated the relationship between unstable (versus stable) power, on the one hand, and leaders' power sharing, on the other. I showed that unstable power undermined a leader's power sharing. Furthermore, the findings presented in Chapter 3 demonstrated that distrust acted as a key psychological mechanism that explains this relationship between unstable power and power sharing. I further distinguished between two dimensions of distrust and showed that occupying an unstable-power position hindered leaders' power sharing because leaders distrusted their employees' benevolence *and* abilities. Finally, I focused on seniority as a key moderating employee characteristic and showed that employee seniority moderated the indirect association between power (in)stability and power sharing, via benevolence (but not ability) distrust. Specifically, results showed that benevolence distrust only mediated the relationship between power (in)stability and power sharing with relatively senior employees, but not with more junior employees.

Finally, Chapter 4 examined the role of power as a potentially corrupting force. In this chapter, I proposed that self-serving justifications are particularly important in shaping the unethical behavior of higher-power (as opposed to lower-power) individuals, because the powerful experience relatively little external constraints and, thus, greater internal conflict when acting unethically (Galinsky, Magee, et al., 2008). Across two studies, measuring power in an organizational field setting and using experimental manipulations of power, the findings showed that higher-power individuals acted less unethically when self-serving justifications were not readily accessible, while lower-power individuals' engagement in unethical behavior was not impacted by the accessibility of self-serving justifications.

Theoretical Contributions

The findings presented in this dissertation make several important theoretical contributions.

A dynamic view of power. First, this dissertation advances a more dynamic view of power, as it examined the intra- and interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability in organizations. As described in Chapter 1, the power literature has primarily conceptualized power as a fixed and stable construct (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation support the power literature's progress (cf. Maner & Mead, 2010; Williams, 2014) from this somewhat static focus to a more dynamic and organizationally-oriented focus, as I took into account that power relations in organizations can and do change over time.

The findings presented in Chapters 2 and 3 showed that unstable power is threatening and shapes powerholders' behavior to be consistent with their motivation to protect this treasured resource. So far, power has typically been construed as a positive construct, with scholars showing its associations with, for instance, increased freedom (Keltner et al., 2003), well-being (Kifer et al., 2013), and optimism (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). A pioneering body of research suggests, however, that when power is unstable, this association between power and beneficial outcomes breaks down (Jordan, Sivanathan, et al., 2011; Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007; Williams, 2014). In such situations of instability, higher-power individuals focus on protecting their privileged power positions. The empirical experimental and field findings presented in this dissertation support this proposition, by showing that unstable power is indeed associated with increased stress and distrust and a reduced willingness of leaders to share their power. Hence, Chapter 2 and 3 of this dissertation suggest that occupying a high-power position can in fact be psychologically demanding, as it may influence leaders to focus on protecting their power.

Moreover, the present dissertation further extends this line of work by showing that such psychologically demanding effects of unstable power are not equally applicable to all individuals. Instead, the results presented in this dissertation suggest that individuals differ in the extent to which they value the psychological and social resources that accompany higher-power positions. Hence, only individuals who are strongly motivated to acquire and protect power and have a

competitive view of the world (i.e., individuals higher in SDO) are negatively impacted by unstable power. Individuals with more egalitarian views and motives (i.e., individuals lower in SDO), on the other hand, seem to not be bothered so much by power (in)stability.

Furthermore, moving beyond the moderating role of characteristics of powerful leaders themselves (i.e., SDO), the findings presented in this dissertation suggest that, with regards to interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability, it is important to consider characteristics of the targets of powerful leaders' behaviors. Chapter 3's results, in particular, illustrated that while unstable power influences leaders to distrust the benevolence of their more senior employees, unstable power is not associated with increased benevolence distrust towards more junior employees. Overall, the findings presented in this dissertation thus suggest that in order to fully understand the intra- and interpersonal consequences of power (in)stability, it is important to take a broader perspective and consider the individual differences of those who hold power and those who surround the powerful.

A nuanced view of power and unethical behavior. Second, this dissertation contributes to a more nuanced view of power and unethical behavior by demonstrating the important role of self-serving justifications in shaping the unethical behavior of the powerful. As described in Chapter 1, the academic literature addressing power has primarily conceptualized power as a corrupting force (e.g., Bendahan, Zehnder, Pralong, & Antonakis, 2015; Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy, & Carney, 2013). In this regard, scholars have argued and shown that higher-power individuals (compared to lower-power individuals) depend less on others and consequently experience less pressure than lower-power individuals to behave according to existing social norms (Galinsky et al., 2003; Lammers et al., 2015). The findings presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation suggest, however, that powerholders' lack of external pressures makes them particularly likely to experience internal pressures and conflicts when acting unethically (cf. Galinsky et al., 2008). Hence, instead of portraying higher-power individuals as 'corrupt and free', these findings suggest that power is not

always a corrupting entity, nor something that is psychologically liberating (see also Overbeck & Park, 2001; Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

In the following section, I discuss the main limitations of this dissertation. Following these limitations, I propose several potential directions for future research, which could further improve the academic understanding of the dynamic nature of power and the association between power and unethical behavior.

A main limitation of the studies presented in Chapters 2 and 3, however, is that one could question whether or not the adopted approach fully realized a dynamic approach to power. Particularly, this dissertation focused solely on powerholders' self-perceived anticipated changes in power. On the one hand, one can say that this psychological experience of power (in)stability is crucial because higher-power individuals act upon their own perception, and therefore, it is logical to focus on individuals' self-perceived power (in)stability. On the other hand, this approach did not allow for the examination of how actual, real-time losses and gains in power influence key organizational outcomes.

Hence, to examine the dynamic nature of power in organizations in more depth, it seems particularly relevant for future research to study the consequences of actual or objective changes in power in real time. Recent research suggests that actual power losses have similar detrimental consequences as the anticipated power losses identified in this dissertation. Brion, Mo, and Lount (2019), for instance, showed that actual power losses (gains) over time decreased (increased) individuals' trust in others. Furthermore, following Brion and colleagues (2019), future research could benefit from taking up a more dynamic methodological approach to studying power (in)stability by adopting longitudinal research designs which allow for the examination of actual changes in power over time. By doing so, scholars may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic nature of power in organizations.

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Related to the previous point, another limitation of this dissertation is that it predominantly focused on downward power (in)stability (i.e., expected power losses). Power (in)stability, however, can also apply in an upward direction, as reflected in the potential to gain additional power in one's group or organization. Research in this regard showed that individuals respond more strongly to gains in power (i.e., by demanding more resources for themselves), as compared to similar sized losses in power (i.e., their demands for resources only decrease by little; Sivanathan, Pillutla, & Murnighan, 2008). This finding suggests that leaders' perceived and actual gains in power may be even more important in shaping their thoughts, feelings, and behavior than their perceived or actual power losses. Hence, future research could explore the consequences of such upward (in)stability in order to further advance our knowledge on power (in)stability and its consequences.

Furthermore, this dissertation examined the moderating role of a unidimensional version of SDO. Ho and colleagues (2015), however, have made a distinction between SDO-dominance (SDO-D) and SDO- Egalitarianism (SDO-E). The former refers to a preference for systems of group-based dominance in which the relatively powerless are forcefully suppressed, while the later refers to a preference for systems that subtly maintain group-based inequality through hierarchy-enhancing ideologies and social policies. Future research could benefit from disentangling these two dimensions of SDO with regards to how they impact individuals' negative responses to power instability. As SDO-D (and not SDO-E) is related to a heightened focus on competition and threat, it seems likely that especially individuals higher in SDO-D (and not individuals high in SDO-E) are negatively impacted by unstable power (Duckitt, 2006).

Finally, this dissertation examined the topics of power (in)stability and unethical behavior in isolation from each other. Specifically, Chapters 2 and 3 focused on the consequences of power (in)stability, while Chapter 4 examined unethical behavior of the relatively powerful. Future research could combine these important lines of research by examining the impact of power

(in)stability for individuals' unethical behavior. On the one hand, research in this regard suggests that unstable (vs. stable) power might increase unethical behavior (Case & Maner, 2014; Williams, 2014). The idea here is that because individuals who occupy unstable power positions are motivated to protect their power, they might act unethically to the extent that this would stabilize their power position (i.e., enhancing themselves and/or derogating others). On the other hand, research suggests that unstable power might reduce unethical behaviors that could potentially harm an individual's power position (i.e., unethical acts that can easily be discovered and/or are considered unacceptable; Kim, Shin, & Lee, 2017). Hence, future research could examine the association between unstable power and unethical behavior, and the potential moderating role of the anticipated consequences of the misconduct. By doing so, future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of power (in)stability and, at the same time, show the complexity of the power to unethical behavior linkage.

Practical Contributions

The decisions that powerful managers make have far-reaching consequences for their employees, their organizations, and for society as a whole. Considering the fact that there are substantial power differences within organizations and the extensive impact of powerholders' behaviors on others, it seems crucial (e.g., for HR professionals) to understand how power affects its beholders. The present dissertation provides at least two important practical implications.

First, I examined the consequences of power (in)stability in organizations. In the increasingly complex and ambiguous world that leaders find themselves today, such power instability is likely to become more and more prevalent (Greer et al., 2017; Wisse et al., 2019). The findings presented in this dissertation showed the potentially detrimental consequences of unstable power. Particularly, I showed that when power was unstable (compared to stable), the relatively powerful experienced more stress, distrusted their employees more, and consequently, were less likely to involve their employees in important decisions (i.e., share their power). The suggestion

that can be derived from these findings is that HR-professionals should try to increase the stability of powerholders' positions if they aim to increase power sharing. At the same time, however, too much of such security and stability could induce feelings of entitlement among powerholders, and thereby enhance the misuse of power (Jongenelen & Vonk, 2007; Lammers, Stapel, et al., 2010). Furthermore, as was shown in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, while a stable hierarchy might reduce stress for higher-power individuals in the organization, it actually increases the stress levels of the majority of organizational members (i.e., the relatively powerless).

A more fruitful strategy for organizations and HR-professionals might therefore be to not focus on trying to increase the stability of high-power organizational members, but instead, to teach high-power organizational members how to effectively manage and deal with the increasing reality of unstable power positions in modern-day organizations. They could do so, for instance, by adopting training programs that teach organizational members about the dynamic nature of organizational life and its potential pitfalls (Neck & Manz, 1996). By doing so, higher-power organizational members might be better equipped to deal with unstable power, and, as a result, be less inclined to focus solely on protecting their own power in such precarious situations.

Additionally, the findings presented in this dissertation suggest that organizations and HR-professionals could focus on the selection process in order to minimize the negative consequences of unstable power. Chapter 2's results, in particular, suggest that not all organizational members are equally impacted by power (in)stability. Instead, only individuals higher in SDO (and not individuals lower in SDO) feel threatened by unstable power (and stable powerlessness). It thus seems particularly fruitful to select individuals lower in SDO to occupy high-power positions, as these individuals would focus less on protecting their power during times of instability.

Furthermore, this dissertation examined the unethical behavior of those in power. As the unethical behavior of powerholders can have far-reaching consequences for organizations and society as a whole, it seems of utmost importance to identify antecedents of misconduct among this

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group of individuals. In fact, ethical failures by powerholders are estimated to cost a typical organization approximately 5 percent of its revenue each year (ACFE, 2018). On top of this, the misconduct of higher-power individuals has the potential to seriously damage an organization's reputation and trickle down to lower levels of the organization (Mayer et al., 2009).

Addressing this important topic, the findings presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation suggest that the availability of self-serving justifications plays a crucial role. These results indicate that in order to minimize the unethical conduct of their powerholders, organizations should ensure that self-serving justifications are not readily accessible. As suggested in Chapter 4, organizations could accomplish this by reducing ethical grey areas (Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002; Shalvi et al., 2015) and adopting specific rules and guidelines (Mulder et al., 2015) that leave little room for the self-justification of powerholders' misconduct. By doing so, organizations would make it more difficult for higher-power individuals to justify their misconduct and as a result reduce their unethical behavior.

Concluding Remarks

The present dissertation examined power in an organizational context. Throughout this dissertation, I touched upon organizational members' strong motivation for power, the consequences of their fear of losing power, and the potentially corrupting effects of power. As such, this dissertation moved towards a more dynamic view of power and a more nuanced view of power and unethical behavior. Overall, I hope that the findings presented in this dissertation will help organizations put power to good use and stimulate future research on this important topic.